Poe’s Dissection of the Mind in The Pit and the Pendulum

Summary. The torture chamber in Poe’s “The Pit and the Pendulum” is a metaphor for the horror of the narrator’s desire for life. In the paper, I adopt the method of intertextuality to investigate the sources of torture and horror in the story, that is, the link between Poe’s work and the literary materials that he read, or might have read. Those materials are significant in this context, since Poe may have derived inspiration from them. They also serve as a Gothic space of horror that marks not only the horror of the inquisitors’ controlling desire, but also the horror due to the narrator’s desire to live. In addition, I will look into Poe’s revelation of the demonic desire in the surreal realm. The demonic figure (or shadow of death) in the narrator’s dreams or state of unconsciousness brings consolation and relief to the narrator. It is Hillman’s guardian spirit. However, the demonic figure disperses when the protagonist strives to survive. Poe introduces the idea of reintegration of the psyche in a spiritual realm, but he disperses it later with expressions of mortals’ fear of death at the moment of “the proximity of death.” His “The Pit and the Pendulum” thus replicates the psyche’s state, swinging between the preservation of life and yielding to death.

Keywords: reintegration of psyche, Gothic space, inquisition chamber, demonic desire, James Hillman’s A Blue Fire

Justine Shu-Ting Kao, Tamkang University, Department of English, No. 151, Yingzhuan Rd, Tamsui Dist., New Taipei City 25137, Taiwan, e-mail: kiwitreesky@yahoo.com
Introduction

Poe believed that consciousness still exists even though the body has already died. His stories that involve the theme of postponed death can be classified into three types of such an event. The first type is caused by the disease catalepsy or another unknown illness that temporarily takes away the breath; a person who has died from any of these illnesses might be restored to life. His stories like *The Fall of the House of Usher* and *The Premature Burial* reveal the horror of being buried alive. The second type is based on the theory of “mortality after death.” In Poe’s humorous stories, such as *A Predicament* and *Mesmeric Revelations*, the dead vividly recount or continue their narration without being alive. Mesmerism caused a sensation among Poe’s contemporaries, and beliefs in postponed death due to this therapeutic system, or doubts about it, occupied the public in the 19th century. The third type of postponed death depends on “remaining reason,” which appears in *The Pit and Pendulum*, a story in which the victim struggles not to surrender to the daemonic figure (death) in dreams. Though men urged by the “life instinct” struggle to remain animated whether they are dying, on the brink of death, or have died, postponed death or remaining conscious after death never brings the human characters happiness, but instead horror, a terrifying condition that haunts Poe’s protagonists.

Sources of torture and horror

In *Torture, Modern Experience, and Beauty in Poe’s ‘The Pit and the Pendulum,’* Jennifer R. Ballengee points out that Margaret Alterton has mapped various sources that Poe draws upon for the construction of the scenes of torture and horror in *The Pit and the Pendulum*. According to Alterton, the opening scene of the Inquisition comes from Juan Antonio Llorente’s *History of the Inquisition of Spain*. As to the figures on the walls, Poe may have derived inspiration from “Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine” and *The Man in the Bell*. The shrinking dungeon is drawn from the same magazine and “The Iron Shroud.” The pit in Poe’s tale bears resemblance to that in Charles Brockden Brown’s *Edgar Huntley*. The raving of the prisoner under the pendulum reminds read-

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2 David Lee Clark, in *The Sources of Poe’s the Pit and the Pendulum*, notes that the story of Weymouth in the Chapter XIV of Brock Brown’s *Edgar Huntley* is the source for the opening inquisition scene and the conclusion of Poe’s *The Pit and the Pendulum.*
Poe’s Dissection of the Mind in *The Pit and the Pendulum*

...ers of *The Man in the Bell.* In *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe,* vol. II: *Tales and Sketches,* Thomas Ollive Mabbott also investigates the sources in Poe’s tale and suggests that Thomas Dick’s *Philosophy of Religion* gives material for the Inquisition plot as well as French General Lasalle’s visit to the palace of the Inquisition. Apart from this, readers might discover the psychological fancies in *The Pit and the Pendulum* are similar to Poe’s previous work, *Colloquy of Monos and Una,* since the latter supplies the theme of “the existence of consciousness in the grave.”

Poe transfers from the other texts to his story the scenes of horror – tortures, hairbreadth escapes, and claustrophobia – to enhance the most ghostly elements in gothic tales, through which he generates his own new ideas for probing the horror of the soul. That is Poe’s style and literary creation: a collection of incredible experiences wove to create ghostly and thrilling stories and evoke horror, concern, and enthusiasm in readers until the fate of the protagonists is finally revealed. Through the relationship of intertextuality between the hypertexts and Poe’s story, the decay of spiritual life is disclosed, as well as the desire for reintegration of the psyche and the weaknesses of the human soul.

In his creation of the most ghoulish story, Poe follows the tradition of Gothicism and dissects the mind. In Europe, Gothicism’s origin is attributed to Horace Walpole’s 1764 novel *The Castle of Otranto.* Lewis’s lurid tale *The Monk* (1796) is one of the next most important Gothic novels. *The Monk* also influenced Ann Radcliffe’s *The Italian* (1797) and the German Gothic author E. T. A. Hoffmann’s *The Devil’s Elixirs* (1815). The rise of Gothic literature is associated with the revival of Gothic architecture, but it does not include images of grandiose cathedrals or any emphasis on heavenly awe (Ballengee 28-29). Gothicism is characteristic of decadence – something expressed in ruined Gothic buildings that evoke dread and horror. A ruined abbey, church, or palace in literature correspond to medieval Gothic architecture in ruins. Benjamin F. Fisher, in his discussion of the history of architectural ruins in Europe, associates the decaying condition of Gothic buildings with the policies of King Henry VIII. In Great Britain, many Gothic buildings – cathedrals, abbeys, monasteries, convents, and churches – fell into ruin after the King broke with the Pope...
in Rome and became head of the Church of England\textsuperscript{7}). Accompanied by the image of decadence, those who had been demonized in the monastery or abbey came to be seen as mysterious supernatural beings. Monks, clergy, and other ecclesiastical members were imagined as “ghosts” or placed “amidst the strange visionary responses otherwise created by Gothic architecture’s combination of vastness and obscurities.”\textsuperscript{8} Ruined, haunted buildings and mysterious monsters are indispensable elements in Gothic literature. Even though the revival of Gothic building in the second half of the eighteenth century brought the Gothic style back in grandiose form, the Gothic novelists continued to associate such buildings with ghostly elements and the image of decay. As David De Vore states, Gothic decadence “not only evokes the atmosphere of horror and dread, but also portrays the deterioration of its world. The decaying, ruined scenery implies that at one time there was a thriving world. At one time the abbey, castle, or landscape was something treasured and appreciated. Now, all that remains is the decaying shell of a once thriving dwelling.”\textsuperscript{9} Much influenced by Gothic literature, Poe’s Gothic tales are characteristic of Gothicism. Poe borrows from this a deranged view of life, philosophy, and religion; his Gothic stories are closely aligned with Dark Romanticism, revealing the unconscious or dark side of human nature – incest, perversion, necrophilia, crime, and so on. Poe presents the decay of the Gothic building not so much as a symbol of the deterioration of the world, but as a metaphor of the disintegration of the psyche. His characters, driven by a desire to reach paradise or escape from tortures in a confined space, always ironically succumb to the dark side of human nature or defer death, as in the case of the story \textit{The Pit and the Pendulum}.

The dimension of our soul travels downward

James Hillman, in \textit{A Blue Fire}, argues that the most disgusting and depressing images in dreams should not be ignored or forced to carry an allegorical moral meaning, but instead should be regarded as ones that “restore pristine power as a numinous person at work in the soul.”\textsuperscript{10} Images in the unconsciousness or dreams have an archetypal meaning: they are the soul resonating with the deepest intimacies of our existence; they are the poetic basis of the mind that saves one from “domination by any

\textsuperscript{8} Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{10} J. Hillman, \textit{A Blue Fire}, New York 1989, p. 25.
single power”\textsuperscript{11} or releases one from the control of one’s ego. Hillman believes with Jung that we are searching for our soul, and the search is structured as a dimension traveling downward, as if experiencing the alchemist’s spiritual trial, yet it is not controlled by the ego: “the psyche presents its own imaginal dimensions, operates freely without words, and is constituted of multiple personalities. We can describe the psyche as a polycentric realm of nonverbal, nonspatial images.”\textsuperscript{12} To describe the images in dreams, Hillman applies terms such as “daimones,” “demonic,” “shadows of life and death,” “guardian spirits,” and “animals.” To discover the soul, the psyche reaches the realm of the underworld which stinks, with smells evoking images. Hillman does not exalt the soul to integration or other forms of unity, but explores the polytheism in the soul that speaks of the existence of spiritual life and reflects itself in images one perceives in dreams or depth psychology. Images are daimones that haunt until one responds to them, until one goes beyond the ego. They are also guardian spirits curing symptoms or calming terrors. As the psyche needs self-understanding, it goes spiritually downward to encounter the images of daimones which are its soul.

To understand the protagonist’s dreams and swoons in Poe’s \textit{The Pit and the Pendulum}, it is necessary to apply Hillman’s poetic basis of mind in \textit{A Blue Fire}. The shadow of death that the protagonist encounters in dreams and strives to recall images of when awakening is the soul of the protagonist that he creates for self-understanding. The protagonist desires for an end of his torments; the daemons, the death that can fulfill his desire if he hands himself over to it. We sense the difference between the victim in \textit{The Iron Shroud} and the one in Poe’s story: while the former expects someone else to claim the end of the torment, the latter never does, but counts on his fantasy-images which are a reflection of his soul, his desire delivering him to somewhere beyond suffering. The shadow of death is the guardian angel protecting the psyche from falling into the inquisitors’ control (the anti-disintegration of the psyche). The scenes of torture and horror in Poe’s \textit{The Pit and the Pendulum} expose the mechanical controlling action of the inquisitors, and they evoke the desire to escape into the realm of dreams, which for Poe is approaching the realm of death. In \textit{Apocalyptic Imagery and the Fragmentation of the psyche: ‘The Pit and the Pendulum}, Jeanne M. Malloy associates the protagonist’s impulse to plunge into the pit and throw himself towards the pendulum with the Romantics’ desire to return to the prenatal state. Poems like Blake’s \textit{Song of Innocence} and Wordsworth’s \textit{Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood} evoke the memories of the prenatal state in divine infancy. Since “the soul has experienced an ideal existence

\textsuperscript{11} Ibidem, p. 48.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibidem, pp. 48-49.
prior to its existence on earth,” it looks for, in the fallen state on earth, the reintegration of the psyche, and the fulfillment of reintegration is possible through the impulse to plunge into the abyss – the prenatal state.\textsuperscript{13} Poe’s Gothicism, as reinforced by those horrible tortures, evokes the vehement desire for exalting to a spiritual realm. In swoons or dreams, the narrator perceives the shadow of death, which reflects the hope that his torment will come to an end.

However, the protagonist, while delivering his soul to rest, to death, strives to survive, as suggested by the motto in \textit{Ligeia}, “man doth not yield himself to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weaken of his feeble will.” Poe has shown the horror of the Will of Man struggling against death in \textit{Ligeia}. Again, in \textit{The Pit and the Pendulum}, sentience or consciousness is not lost at death or on the edge of it, and the struggle against “the guardian angel” makes the torture room a space of horror, where the psyche, swinging between the preservation of life and yielding to death, compromises and accepts further tortures in order to defer death.

\textbf{Seven candles in the inquisition chamber}

\textit{The Pit and the Pendulum} begins with a trial in the Inquisition chamber without informing readers what crime the protagonist is said to have committed. It seems that the protagonist is going to lose his consciousness in the gloomy atmosphere intermingled with the inquisitorial voices. He hears “the burr of a mill-wheel,” and he sees the “imperceptible waving of the sable draperies.”\textsuperscript{14} As the death sentence reaches his ears, his focus gradually shifts from the lips of the inquisitors to the seven tall candles standing upright upon the table. The protagonist perceives these in the shape of an angel, reflecting his desire for protection and salvation. “At first,” the narrator recounts, “they wore the aspect of charity, and seemed white slender angels who would save me.”\textsuperscript{15} The seven candles are then associated with the seven candlesticks in the \textit{Book of Revelation}:

   11. Saying, I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last: and, What thou seest, write in a book, and send it unto the seven churches which are in Asia; unto Ephesus, and unto Smyrna, and unto Pergamos, and unto Thyatira, and unto Sardis, and unto Philadelphia, and unto Laodicea. 12. And I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks; 13 And in the midst of the seven can-


\textsuperscript{14} \textit{The Pit and the Pendulum. The Collected Works...}, pp. 681-682.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibidem, p. 682.
dlesticks one like unto the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and
girt about the paps with a golden girdle.\textsuperscript{16}

However, the image of the seven candles gradually generates in the condemned
the feelings of nausea, which is then followed by a sense of hopelessness.

And then there stole into my fancy, like a rich musical note, the thought of what sweet
rest there must be in the grave. The thought came gently and stealthily, and it seemed
long before it attained full appreciation; but just as my spirit came at length properly
to feel and entertain it, the figures of the judges vanished, as if magically, from before
me; the tall candles sank into nothingness; their flames went out utterly; the black-
ness of darkness supervened; all sensations appeared swallowed up in a mad rush-
ing descent as of the soul into Hades. Then silence, and stillness, and night were the
universe.\textsuperscript{17}

The seven candles, before being put out, gradually mingle with the narrator’s
fantasy and feeling of tranquility. They give the narrator a moment of sweet respite.
Muffled in dark silence, the narrator feels nothing, but stillness or perhaps peace.

The opening scene of the inquisition chamber foreshadows the protagonist’s
dark unconscious desire of yielding to the hand of the God of the Abyss. It divulges
the protagonist’s desire to withdraw from tortures, free himself from mental distur-
bance, and return to the spiritual world of nothingness (the dissolution of the ego).
At the moment of losing consciousness, the narrator has “the transient visions” ac-
cessing to the uncanny realm or “a liminal state.”\textsuperscript{18} However, the narrator’s phobia of
death makes him withdraw from the angelic world of the seven candles. The seven
candles then reverse from reflecting an image of the angel to mirroring the fear of
the protagonist, gradually growing into a horrifying scene and generating a sense
of nausea in the narrator.

**Gothic sublime on the brink of the pit**

The pit is a space of horror due to the controlling desire of the inquisitors, but also
a surreal space of the anti-disintegration of the psyche – a “demonic desire” germi-
nated in dreams, but dispersed at the moment of “the proximity of death” when the
narrator looks for survival (“postponed death”).


\textsuperscript{17} The Pit and the Pendulum. The Collected Works..., p. 682.

\textsuperscript{18} J.R. Ballengee, Torture, Modern Experience..., p. 31.
In the prison, the protagonist experiences a series of recoveries from swoons, and each recovery is accompanied by memories of the unconscious visions of an abyss. In his first return to consciousness, he recalls someone holding him down towards the deep pit.

These shadows of memory tell, indistinctly, of tall figures that lifted and bore me in silence down – down – still down – till a hideous dizziness oppressed me at the mere idea of the interminableness of the descent. They tell also of a vague horror at my heart on account of that heart’s unnatural stillness.19

The mysterious figure, in the narrator’s recollection of the dream parallels the raven in Poe’s poem *The Raven*, since both of them bear gifts of the Abyss and have the potential to offer consolation and comfort. Both comforters – the raven and demonic figure – disperse at the moment when the narrator feels horror and desires to escape from the world of death.

The pit that appears in the narrator’s dream also exists in the real world. When he tries to advance some paces after recovering from a faint he is entangled by his own robe and falls upon his face, just on the brink of the pit. Though the protagonist does not fall into it, the scene of the pit constantly returns in his dreams. He can only remember a few incomplete visions of it after regaining consciousness. The brink of the pit is the gap between life and death, between the world of reality and that of dreams. It is an obscure area that cannot be defined by language. It is also an area that drives impulses to plunge into the abyss in the pit. It looks to extinguish the subject’s identity (the ego). In Gothic discourse, the mysterious gap is the Gothic sublime. Andrew Smith in *The Gothic and the Sublime* says:

In the specifically Gothic discourse the subject is constructed through a variety of apparently uncategorisable impulses. This is manifested in an overt way through the Gothic’s reliance upon nameless ‘monsters’ and spectral presences. Language disintegrates in front of an image which is more powerful than language can express. These presences also dramatise how the problematic status of language in relation to ‘authentic’ experiences is inherent in discourses on the sublime. This relates directly to the Gothic because there the idea of presence is established outside of cultural codes (outside the laws of the possible); the sublime itself is an experience beyond culture and the very attempt to analyse it makes the sublime disappear. In other words, the sublime appears to be a gap in thought itself and the act of trying to think about that gap makes the sublime slip away from experience. Likewise, the attempt to analyse

the spectral is founded on the contradiction of an absent presence which disappears when confronted with the cultural authority which it seems to challenge.\(^{20}\)

The strange smell in the prison makes the protagonist aware of the existence of the gap which is buried deep in the unconscious or dreams. “The peculiar smell of decayed fungus arose to my nostrils. I put forward my arm, and shuddered to find that I had fallen at the very brink of a circular pit,” says the protagonist\(^{21}\) (“The Pit and the Pendulum” as he is breathing in the smell that comes from the depths of the pit, a world “outside of cultural codes.”\(^{22}\)

On the brink of the pit, two desires grasp the protagonist. On one hand, the narrator looks for a chance to escape from the confined room. He “congratulate[s] [himself] upon the timely accident by which [he has] escaped” the pit\(^{23}\). This “fortunate” escape gives him hope to survive incarceration. On the other hand, the narrator, driven by an unknown impulse, desires to plunge into the pit. He is trembling with the sudden idea of plunging “into one of these abysses,”\(^{24}\) and he falls into slumber again to look for the world of the abyss in dreams. After waking from a swoon, he tries to describe the scene in the abyss from memory, but language fails due to horror and the desire for life. His concentration on the recollection of the abyss dissipates, since he feels hungry and the instinct for self-preservation urges him to look for food and escape his plight. The gap, “founded on the contradiction of an absent presence,” constantly harasses the protagonist to ponder life and death. Ballengee observes the narrator’s “awkward perch upon the lip of the abyss”\(^{25}\) as “the continual deferment of death.”\(^{26}\) Pain and tortures evoke his demonic desire for self-destruction, but fear of destruction urges him to postpone death by hurling back to life. The demonic figure is the shadow of his mind, or Hillman’s daemon, which he seeks


\(^{21}\) *The Pit and the Pendulum. The Collected Works...*, p. 687.

\(^{22}\) As the Self is violently cast out of the symbolic order, he has a sense of being cast off and he is in abjection. While the symbolic order maintains clear boundaries between nature and society, abjection, which shows the Self death, is an ambiguous realm. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva says, “A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not signify death. In the presence of signified death – a flat encephalograph, for instance – I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being” (3).

\(^{23}\) *The Pit and the Pendulum. The Collected Works...*, p. 687.

\(^{24}\) Ibidem, p. 687.

\(^{25}\) Ibidem.

\(^{26}\) Ibidem.
and abandons. “Having failed to fall,” the protagonist says, “it was no part of the
demon plan to hurl me into the abyss; and thus (there being no alternative) a dif-
ferent and a milder destruction awaited me. Milder” (*The Pit and the Pendulum* 690).

Infernal light that stirs emotions

In the prison room there is a dim sulfurous light. After his salvation from the scimitar
pendulum the narrator seems to perceive the origin of the light in the dream. For
many minutes of a dreamy and trembling abstraction, I busied myself in vain, uncon-
nected conjecture. During this period, I became aware, for the first time, of the origin
of the sulphurous light which illumined the cell. It proceeded from a fissure, about
halyuf an inch in width, extending entirely around the prison at the base of the walls,
which thus appeared, and were completely separated from the floor. I endeavored,
but of course in vain, to look through the aperture.27

In *Infernal Illumination in Poe*, Oliver Evans identifies the light with “infernal il-
lumination.”

One looks in vain for instances of infernal illumination in the Gothic tales by which
Poe was specifically influenced (e.g., “Monk” Lewis’ *House on the Heath*, a source for
“The Fall of the House of Usher,” and Charles Brockden Brown’s *Edgar Huntly*, a source
for “The Pit and the Pendulum”): it is apparently original with Poe, and the fact that he
was concerned with the subject throughout the thirteen most productive years of his
career suggests an obsessive interest in it. On the conscious level, he exploited it as
a dramatic device to heighten the atmosphere of horror and supernaturalism.28

This infernal illumination takes diverse forms in Poe’s tales – starlight, moon-
light, sunlight, the light of lamps and tapers – and is associated “with a strong sense
of doom and impending destruction.”29 The subterranean light coming from an
unknown world through the fissure gives the confined room the atmosphere of
the abyss. The subterranean light and the strange order indicate that the confined
room is an ambiguous realm of life and death.

Originally, the light in the Gothic Cathedral is linked to the geometric shape of
rose windows, manifesting the wheel of the mandala. It is believed that the light
passing through the rose windows has effects of healing and revivification. It is like-
wise believed that such windows were made by alchemists.

27 Ibidem, p. 695.
As Evans indicates, Poe believes that the subterranean light that falls in the Gothic space comes not from heaven, but the infernal world. As it appears, men and women are driven into madness, fear, and self-destruction. Though it is as omnipresent as the heavenly light perceived in the rose windows, the light appears to be characteristic of the power of destruction and death.

The light is sent from Poe's God of the Abyss – the destroyer of the ego. The protagonist is in a prison that is animated as it constantly shocks him out of his senses and gradually destroys his limited reason. The protagonist tries to maintain his reason, but each struggle to remain conscious is interrupted. He performs calculations to know the surroundings in the prison, but the chamber is beyond his recognition since the limits of the room change. It seems that the limits of the chamber are decided by how far the infernal light dims rather than the figures (the size of the room) that the protagonist calculates.

**The scimitar pendulum that sucks blood**

From the ceiling of the chamber hangs an enormous razor-sharp pendulum that descends towards the protagonist, who finds himself tied to the ground by a leather strap.

[... ] at a casual glance, I supposed to be the pictured image of a huge pendulum, such as we see on antique clocks. There was something, however, in the appearance of this machine which caused me to regard it more attentively. While I gazed directly upward at it [... ] I fancied that I saw it in motion. In an instant afterward the fancy was confirmed. Its sweep was brief, and of course slow. I watched it for some minutes, somewhat in fear, but more in wonder [...]. But what mainly disturbed me was the idea that it had perceptibly descended. I now observed – with what horror it is needless to say – that its nether extremity was formed of a crescent of glittering steel, about a foot in length from horn to horn; the horns upward, and the under edge evidently as keen as that of a razor.

He recognizes that the pendulum will be lowered towards his immovable body and cut off his flesh, just as a vampire cuts through the flesh with its fangs and sucks the blood of its victim. Fear causes him to squirm under the scimitar pendulum. He smells a weird odor and is driven by an impulse to lift upwards to the knife of the pendulum:

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The odor of the sharp steel forced itself into my nostrils. I prayed – I wearied heaven with my prayer for its more speedy descent. I grew frantically mad, and struggled to force myself upward against the sweep of the fearful scimitar. And then I fell suddenly calm, and lay smiling at the glittering death, as a child at some rare bauble.  

He falls into a faint again. In the dream, he perceives demons, but they are not threatening. He forgets his horror caused by the pendulum. He regains consciousness, starts to “ponder upon the sound of the crescent,” and takes “a frenzied pleasure in contrasting its downward with its lateral velocity” He laughs and howls hysterically. On the brink of death, the protagonist has not completely lost his reason: he thinks that the bondage that ties him to the ground might be cut off by the razor. When he feels hope that he may escape from his plight, the hope is extinguished since the bondage envelops him “close in all directions – save in the path of the destroying crescent”. He feels new hope to escape by inducing the rats to nibble the rancid meat that he has smeared on the bandage. He escapes from the falling pendulum, but freedom only pushes him to another torture. The cell shifts its form into that of a lozenge so as to force the protagonist to the center of the chamber. He returns to the brink of the pit that summons him to fall into the abyss.

The pendulum is characteristic of monsters in Gothic literature, and evokes a monstrous impulse towards self-destruction. As Smith indicates, monsters or specters in Gothic literature appear in the gap – and the absent present – outside of cultural codes. With their appearance, the characters experience the Gothic sublime beyond culture and language. Paradoxically, Poe's pendulum, like a vampire, is characteristic of double meanings. On the one hand it is the mechanical machine designed out of the controlling desire of the inquisitors. It moves the protagonist to disintegration. On the other hand, demonic desire of death penetrates the pendulum. The pendulum desires flesh and blood as much as the spirit of its victim. It is the object of the narrator's imagination of being murdered and saved for immortality.

Allen Tate, in Our Cousin, Mr. Poe, holds that vampirism in Poe's tales functions to move his heroes and heroines towards spiritual unity through dissipation of the body. Most of Poe's female heroines are shown as vampires. They linger upon the un-linguistic realm and do their “reciprocal work upon the inner being” to “achieve spiritual identity in mutual destruction” with their lovers. In The Fall of the House of

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31 Ibidem, p. 691.
32 Ibidem, p. 692.
33 Ibidem.
Usher, Madeline, after being entombed alive by her brother, moves out of the coffin and completes the initiation with him. In Ligeia, the survival of the soul of Ligeia in a dead body is related to “spiritual vampirism”: sucking the being, the spirit, of the lover.\textsuperscript{35} Vampirism in Poe's tales thus reflects the desire for spiritual oneness. In vampiric relationships, Poe's male protagonists are driven to succumb to vampire-women who simultaneously possess maternal elements. For example, Roderick Usher, in his gradual physical decline, transfers vitality and life-energy to sustain an interpersonal relationship with his sister until the absolute possession brings destruction upon the Usher family. However, not all of Poe's protagonists complete their ritual of spiritual oneness through destruction. In Ligeia, the narrator fails to retrieve spiritual Ligeia through his ritual of necromancy since he fears the decay and death shown on “the resurrection” of Ligeia.

In Poe's The Pit and the Pendulum, the pendulum in motion is also symbolic of a “spiritual vampire” that seeks to possess the protagonist. The instinct of self-preservation urges the protagonist to try to maintain his reason and will to escape when he is focusing on the rhythm of the razor pendulum and feeling nausea due to the

\textsuperscript{35} Nicolas Kiessling points out that James B. Twitchell in The Living Dead: A Study of the Vampire in Romantic Literature has analyzed the vampire relationship between lovers in Poe's stories. “To know a living thing is to kill it... For this reason, the desirous consciousness, the SPIRIT, is a vampire.” Thus each partner in Poe's early stories, 'Berenice,' 'Morella,' and 'Ligeia,' enervates and consumes the other as the love gets out of control. The women in these stories are seen as lamias, and the vampire analogy illuminates how 'one lover attempts too much, and so violates the psychic privacy of the other' by demanding 'absolute possession even though possession finally means destruction' (p.168). The same analogy holds true in 'The Fall of the House of Usher,' where brother, sister, house, and narrator are all vampiric in a relationship that serves as 'a mode of discussing energy exchange (p.129). Finally, in 'The Oval Portrait,' we have an artist who is so obsessed with his art that he fails to perceive the slow decline of his wife as he nears the completion of her portrait. Twitchell argues that the myth of the vampire lies behind the story, serving as 'an ideal paradigm for... art that is too life-consuming.' Vampirism is an energy exchange. Initially, vitality flows between the lovers as they are attached to each other. Eventually the stronger member takes control until excessive spiritual love has gone awry. Twitchell in D. H. Lawrence and the Modern Vampire gives D. H. Lawrence's description of the vampire relationship of lovers: “It is easy to see why each man kills the things he loves. To know a living thing is to kill it... to try to know any living being is to try to suck the life out of that being... It is the temptation of a vampire fiend, is this knowledge.' Laurence attempts to illustrate this process in The Rainbow" (195). Lovers in a vampire relationship look for interpersonal relationship. In an aberrant transfer of energy of vitality, they elevate or resign the innermost center in oneness. See also R. L. Johnson, The Vampire Archetype, http://jungian.info/library.cfm?idsLibrary=9 [10.12.2017]. Vampirism can also be seen in a community or religion holding a collective consciousness. For example, in Bram Stoker's Dracula, Count Dracula forces Mina to drink his blood so as to transfer to her the collective consciousness of vampires and weaken the power of his antagonist Dr. Van Helsing. As Mina unconsciously tastes the demonic blood, Dracula says, “Now you shall be flesh of my flesh, and blood of my blood.”
strange odor. Nevertheless, demonic desires urge him to rush “upward against the sweep of the fearful scimitar.” The sound of the crescent in its descending motion evokes “frenzied pleasure” in the protagonist. Between the pendulum and the protagonist, there exists a mysterious magnetic force that drives the man to paranoia and self-destruction as the scimitar works upon his inner being and intends to set his spirit free from the body; the protagonist imagines that the pendulum desires to occupy his spirit while it is driving him to death.

To escape this, the narrator seeks the helps of the rats that can postpone his death. The rats, in contrast to the pendulum, occupy the body only to satisfy the basest desire – hunger. In the description of the rats nibbling the rancid food he has smeared on the bandage, the protagonist presents them as the lowest creatures who are obsessed with lustful desire for the body:

Forth from the well they hurried in fresh troops. They clung to the wood – they overran it, and leaped in hundreds upon my person. The measured movement of the pendulum disturbed them not at all. Avoiding its strokes, they busied themselves with the anointed bandage. They pressed – they swarmed upon me in ever accumulating heaps. [T]hey writhed upon my throat; their cold lips sought my own; I was half stifled by their thronging pressure; disgust, for which the world has no name, swelled my bosom, and chilled, with a heavy clamminess, my heart (The Pit and the Pendulum 694).

The role of the rats remains unknown to us. As Margaret Alterton in An Additional Source for Poe’s The Pit and the Pendulum points out, the rats in Poe’s tales are not derived from any other writer’s Gothic works. They impress us since they appear as disgusting creatures cruelly devouring Zenobia’s loyal dog in A Predicament, and ravenous predators nibbling the rancid meat in The Pit and the Pendulum. Poe associates them with soulless objects, only responding mechanically to physical needs. Probably the protagonist hates them because they prevent him from being killed by his vampire lover (the pendulum). The rats cause the deferment of death: their nibbling the bandages off makes the protagonist fail to move towards destruction under the scimitar pendulum.

**The contracting walls stimulate sensation and the desire to die**

Poe’s house and its surroundings have an animate force. The walls in the chamber shift from a square into a lozenge shape, and their contracting form forces the pro-
agonist to move to the center of the room so as to make him confront the brink of the abyss.36

There had been a second change in the cell... The room had been square. I saw that two of its iron angles were not acute – two, consequently, obtuse. The fearful difference quickly increased with a low rumbling or moaning sound. In an instant the apartment had shifted its form into that of a lozenge. But the alteration stopped not here – I neither hoped nor desired it to stop. I could have clasped the red walls to my bosom as a garment of eternal peace.37

The contracting walls are similar to the shrinking walls and cells in William Mudford’s *The Iron Shroud* (or *Italian Revenge*), a Gothic story written in 1830 and published in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*. In *The Iron Shroud*, the iron chamber walls and ceiling slowly contract to the point of eventually crushing and enveloping the victim in a lethal embrace until the latter becomes a shrouded corpse. Driven by an animating force, the chamber changes its shape slowly through mechanical means and eventually murders its victim. Finally, the iron cell replaces everything in the chamber, and everything in the confined room, including the skeleton of the victim, turns into dust.

Everything “alive” in Poe’s tales aims to stimulate sensations. Every gruesome image in Poe’s *The Fall of the House of Usher* – the skeleton-house, the arm-trees, the melancholy tarn, etc. – thrills the narrator. In much the same vein, the moving walls in the cell create a moaning sound and push the protagonist to the brink of the pit, thus metaphorically forcing him to approach his unconsciousness. As Richard Wilbur claims in *The House of Poe*, Poe’s architecture symbolizes the human head that has an enlightened unconsciousness in an enclosed, secluded space.38

Some critics, like Wilbur, who tries to account for Poe’s supernatural Gothic setting, associate the animate objects in Poe’s tales with an expression of the author’s desire to come back to his mother. One of Poe’s most important biographers, Marie Bonaparte, identifies the mother’s body in the subterranean passages, the cell, the walls, and the vault. This body blocks or directs “the movement, in the bowels, of the faeces to which the child, in its anal sexual theories, likens itself.”39 Maurice Lévy

36 The center of the chamber, where the protagonist is confined, is the pit. It is “the yawning gulf” of the walls that forces him to move towards it.


38 In the case of *The Fall of the House of Usher*, Richard Wilbur sees the gloomy house as the head of its owner. As the exterior is “the physical body of Roderick Usher,” the interior is “Roderick Usher’s visionary mind” (Wilbur 264).

sees the Gothic tradition in Poe’s tales. In this, the Gothic space, characteristic of “Mother Earth,” has the power of protection:

The Gothic buildings are only the spatial representation of Catholicism, which at that time still remained for the Anglican conscience the symbol of all abuses and of the most refined mental cruelties. It would be impossible to list the dusty remains of all the minor imitations of Lewis and Radcliffe in which the hero is sometime confined in a filthy cell, from which only a natural event such as earthquake or tidal wave, or some quirk of exterior forces, liberates him (25).

Only through the animate movement of the mother’s body in the confined chamber can the hero recover his salvation. The interior in the Gothic space – the pit – is linked to a space of salvation, into which the dreamer enjoys descending into the deepest part and feels absorbed into the mother’s body.

The protagonist in *The Pit and the Pendulum* has a strong yearning to come back to the prenatal state. As Jeanne M. Malloy points out, Poe is “rewriting the biblical story of mankind’s fall and redemption as a psychological process of loss and restoration” (86). The scene of the deep pit that appears in the protagonist’s dreams and imagination is the prenatal state to which he yearns to return. The deep pit is symbolic of the prenatal state – a safe condition in the mother’s body. Arthur Paul Patterson observes the experiences of horror, torture, and desire to die in the process of returning to the primordial state. Yet on the approach of death, the narrator escapes to a pit for survival. The desire for death in the realm of God is “countered by the continual deferment of death.”

The masonry of the dungeon

Poe describes the masonry as impenetrable material that makes escape from confinement impossible. As the protagonist tries to “force the blade in some minute crevice of the masonry,” he fails. Nevertheless, the masonry wall has “a fissure,” through which “the sulphurous light” can enter and illuminate the chamber. The hard stone walls remind us of the ancient stone Usher House in *The Fall of the House of Usher*. “No portion of the masonry had fallen” (*The Fall of the House of Usher* 400), the narrator observes, but there is a fissure that draws from the top of the building to the bottom

attached to the slumbering tarn. The masonry also recalls various murders in Poe's tales: the Montresor's cell in *The Cask of Amontillado*, the burned ruined house in *The Black Cat*, and the house in *The Tell-Tale Heart*. The masonry in the abbey is associated with Egyptian pyramids and Druid’s Stonehenge in *Ligeia*. Poe’s stone dungeon in *The Pit and the Pendulum* is a Gothic space where demonic light can enter though any escape from confinement is impossible.

Poe’s masonry circumscribes a space where a demon works on its destruction. The demon portraits on the masonry walls are not simply a fresco. They are animate, and constantly gaze on the chamber.

Demon eyes, of a wild and ghastly vivacity, glared upon me in a thousand directions, where none had been visible before, and gleamed with the lurid lustre of a fire that I could not force my imagination to regard as unreal.42

The demon eyes on the wall are, as Ballengee argues, “self-referentiality” in which “art plays a role in the experience of death” when the narrator is “exploring the ‘gulf beyond’ through the recollection of a series of tortures.”43 In one of the panels on the side walls, a painted figure of Time is shown in the form of “a scythe.” The image of a pendulum, when associated with images of a clock in ancient stone temples, signifies the power of destruction in a limited time. A clock or pendulum is accompanied by the destruction of the Devil in Poe’s tales. In *The Masque of the Red Death*, as the clock strikes midnight, time ends and all the masqueraders fall down and die. In *A Predicament*, the minute hand of the clock falls upon Zenobia’s neck at “twenty-five minutes past five in the afternoon.” In much the same way, the power of destruction is obviously shown through the pendulum in *The Pit and the Pendulum*. Jean-Paul Weber compares the dungeon to the dial of the clock and bases the relationship between the prisoner and the pendulum on the two clocks-hands: the prisoner “represents the shorter hour hand” and the pendulum “represents the minute hand” (Weber 95). The meeting of the minute hand and the hour hand occur at six o’clock:

In other words the hour hand descends into the lower half of the dial. Not, certainly, into the lowest depths, represented habitually by the figure “6”; for at the very center of the underground prison gapes a yet deeper abyss, the pit, to the very verge of which the prisoner moves, though he does not plunge into it. Thus the confrontation of the pendulum, the minute hand (which also descends from above, that is to say,

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43 J.R. Ballengee, *Torture, Modern Experience*..., p. 36.
plunges in pursuit of the hour hand into the lower half of the dial) with the prisoner, the hour hand, will take place very near the number “six”...⁴⁴

Everything in the dungeon – the paintings, the pendulum, and the pit – reveals an animate force and destructive power in the form of art.

Death, for Poe, is a passage towards the reintegration of the psyche. As the protagonist relinquishes himself to death, he shows the organism’s will to self-destruction, since the complete dissolution of the body is a necessary ritual for the reintegration of the psyche. Death, for Poe, is not the termination of existence, but a process in the Divine Design. In *Eureka*, Poe believes that evil and death coexist and take part in the reintegration of all souls into a Spiritual God⁴⁵. Further, Poe points out that feelings of pain and torture reflect creatures’ struggle for happiness in the process of reintegration with Divinity.⁴⁶ Thus, evil and death in Poe’s tales propel the Self towards spiritual deliverance, reintegration with the Divine Being as the Self reaches eternal rest. Poe’s reintegration of the psyche bears similarities to the English Romantics’ identification of death with the desire for the prenatal ideal world. All the ghostly scenes in the dungeon intensify emotions and sentiments for self-relinquishment to death. Yet the concluding scene of being rescued by the French army propels the narrator back to life, which is the repetition of the narrator’s previous attempts to escape from death. Jeanne M. Malloy identifies the “outstretched arm of General Lasalle” as the arm of the Lord that rescues the protagonist from the prison, and the whole tale echoes the apocalyptic imagery of salvation (83). The image of an arm holding that of the protagonist stands for the Second Coming of Christ. Further, Malloy associates the scene of salvation with the reintegration of the psyche. After struggles between life and death, “the narrator,” Malloy says, “achieves a desirable reintegration of his fragmented psyche by being forced to acknowledge the power of the unconscious and the limitations of the intellect” (94). “*The Pit and the Pendulum* reveals itself as a meditation on the fragmentation resulting from humankind’s estrangement from the divine and on the redemption achieved through suffering and self-knowledge” (95). In contrast, Ballengee does not interpret the scene of being rescued by the French army as spiritual salvation. The critic argues that the narrator does not annihilate himself falling into the embrace of death/happiness, but takes the position of “transgressive witness” of death in life, either as a torturer or a tortured “watching the progress of [his] tortures” for deferment of death. Whether or not the narrator survives remains

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⁴⁶ Ibidem, p. 314.
a mystery to us in the last scene. The narrator, while experiencing several faints and recuperations, has transferred the image of the God of death from his dreams to art (the demonic gaze on the wall paintings), yet the revisions of the spiritual realm are transient. With the aid of the French army, he eventually ends his tortures in the chamber and goes beyond death. However, the last scene calls into question the fulfilment of the poetic mind in real life: Can one make the transient visions encountered in the depth of psyche accessible to reality?

Conclusion

Poe’s story has haunted the film industry, including Henri Desfontaines’ *Le Puits et le pendula*, Roger Corman’s *The Pit and the Pendulum*, Alexandre Astruc’s *The Pit and the Pendulum*, Harald Reinl’s film, the animated cartoon series *The Perils of Penelope Pitstop*, the Czech Surrealist Jan Švankmajer’s *The Pendulum, the Pit and Hope*, Stuart Gordon’s 1991 film version of the story, a stop-motion animated adaptation produced in 2006, David DeCoteau’s 2009 horror film, the 2012 horror/mystery film *The Raven*, and the 2015 animated anthology *Extraordinary Tales*. Poe exalts Gothic horror to psychological level, and his influence on art, literature, and film never ceases. The picture of Father Time, with a razor–sharp pendulum swinging back and forth and descending, is the image of Daemon in the depth of psyche, from which the protagonist cannot escape; Father Time controls the pendulum and haunts. The narrator’s mental state, horrified by the images, whether in reality or dreams, undergoes a search for the spiritual realm in the depth of psyche. His mediation of a plunge results from a demonic desire to approach or yield to death. Yet, due to the survival instinct, the narrator struggles to reawaken from the realm of death. He struggles to maintain reason, and reason, as is stated in Poe’s *The Imp of the Perverse*, “violently deters us from the brink.” The strong human will to survive does not bring them happiness, but it is accompanied with a perverse mind disturbing the sweet rest in the grave, and thus brings horror. Swinging between the preservation of life and yielding to death undergoes nearly all of Poe’s works. Monomania befalls almost all of Poe’s protagonists who struggle between the desire for the spiritual realm and the fear of death. James Russell Lowell comments on Poe’s dissection of the mind:

A monomania he paints with great power. He loves to dissect these cancers of the mind, and to trace all the subtle ramifications of its roots. In raising images of horror, also, he has a strange success; conveying to us sometimes by a dusty hint some terrible doubt which is the secret of all horror (qtd in Ingram 230).
Monomania reveals the predicament of the man incapable of delivering the soul to the spiritual realm due to his survival instinct. The last scene of religious salvation thus is a sort of replacement for the situation of the victim, who desires the deferment of death for a salvation which does not exist.

**Literature**

Alterton M., *An Additional Source for Poe’s The Pit and the Pendulum*, “Modern Language Notes” no. 47, 1933.


